

Orthodox Jewish women 'erased' by popular culture, research finds

August 31 2018

WOMEN OF VALOR

Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters,
Crime Writers, and Rock Stars
in Contemporary Literature and Culture



KAREN E. H. SKINAZI

Women of Valor: Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture', Karen E.H.Skinazi, Rutgers University Press, 2018

Research led by a senior academic from the University of Birmingham has found that the media and popular culture frequently depict Orthodox Jewish women as powerless, silent individuals who are at best naive to live a religious lifestyle, and at worst coerced into it.

Women of Valor: Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture, by Dr. Karen E. H. Skinazi, an academic practice advisor for the University, is one of the first works to challenge this popular portrayal of Orthodox Jewish [women](#) by showcasing and analysing a body of art generated by the women themselves.

Due to be published on September 7 by Rutgers University Press, the work examines representations of Orthodox women in memoirs, comics, novels, cover art, blogs, radio shows, television, music, and movies, and speaks with the authors, filmmakers, and musicians who create them.

The book finds that contrary to the conservative stereotype, there is a far more modern and frankly interesting reality and culture emerging amongst Orthodox Jewish women. The problem is that there is an unwillingness to recognise and engage with it from the media and within [popular culture](#).

Against a backdrop of growing religious fundamentalism, which has led to modesty patrols, rigid gender segregation, and the curtailing of

women's activities (such as driving), Karen finds stories of women affirming, questioning, and negotiating religious and feminist values. She threads lines from the poem 'Eshes Chayil', the biblical description of the "Woman of Valour" in Proverbs 31 that is sung every Friday night to Jewish women into her book, demonstrating a long legacy of empowered Jewish womanhood. Using this proverb to unite Judaism and feminism in a complex and surprisingly modern relationship, *Women of Valor* provides a framework for studying religious women in liberal-democratic societies of the 21st century.

Karen said:

"Over the years, I became aware of a stark contrast between the dominant narrative of the Orthodox Jewish woman as subservient baby machine and the incredibly strong, dynamic Orthodox Jewish women I knew. Take my mother-in-law: she has two master's degrees, was the federal language commissioner's representative in Quebec, and in her spare time, she served as the president of the association of Jewish day schools in Montreal. She is also an Orthodox woman.

"It often seems like the only feminist possibilities mainstream novels and films can imagine for religious women are stories where the women, like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, take their leave. A perfect example is the film *Disobedience*, coming to British cinemas September, based on the novel by British writer Naomi Alderman. Alderman's novel tells of a London Orthodox Jewish lesbian who struggles to find a way to reconcile her sexuality and her religious beliefs. The novel is nuanced and thoughtful and shows that women can change their communities from within. But in the upcoming film version, we see the commonplace idea that, repressed by religious "extremism," Orthodox women can only have a "happy ending" if they abandon their communities. In *Women of Valor*, I highlight the alternative: stories of empowered women who stay and transform their communities."

In the introduction, Karen details the real challenges that Orthodox women face in their communities, delving into the decrees published by prominent rabbis over the last decade, i.e., consigning women to their homes, forbidding them from wearing bright colours, banning them from driving, forcing them to sit in the back of the bus. Men in the communities, she explains, commit acts of violence to police the dress and behaviour of women—and sometimes even young girls. News articles covering these stories are nothing short of harrowing. But, Karen writes, "what is lost in the mainstream media representations is this: Orthodox girls and women were (and are) not all sitting silently in their dun-colored, floor-length, appropriately fastened clothing at the back of the bus or locked in their homes, despairing their helpless fate."

Throughout the rest of the book, we see many examples of the cultural work produced primarily by Orthodox women who choose to negotiate their experiences through art. In one chapter, Karen examines novels and films about Orthodox Jewish women's professional success. The biblical "Woman of Valour" is undoubtedly a businesswoman: "She considers a field and buys it; from the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard. She girds her loins with might and strengthens her arms. She senses that her enterprise is good, so her lamp is not extinguished at night." So too are many contemporary Orthodox Jewish women, and the idea that a Jewish woman belongs in the home is a new—and dangerous—interpretation that many Jewish women writers, that Karen analyses, refute.

In another chapter, Karen reveals an obscure but fascinating alternative cultural world that makes a feminist virtue of gender segregation: an Orthodox Jewish women's film industry developed and worked in exclusively by women (they are the writers, directors, camera operators, actors, etc.), with the films produced viewed only by women; and bands (such as the all-girl alt-rock indie Hasidic band, Bulletproof Stockings—a name that mocks the rabbinical decrees and stereotypes of

Orthodox women) that comprise women musicians and play for strictly all-women audiences.

Provided by University of Birmingham

Citation: Orthodox Jewish women 'erased' by popular culture, research finds (2018, August 31)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2018-08-orthodox-jewish-women-erased-popular.html>

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